CHAPTER XII

Their Diseases, Death, Mourning, Burial, and Fancies Concerning The Soul

164 Nearly all the Caribs have that disease called the sickness of
757 Naples, or as others say, yaws, which is scarcely any better. The disease is fairly common among the Negroes, and some of the French also suffer from it. It is not, however, at least not always, the responsibility of Venus, since even small children have it. To cure themselves, they do not try sweating at all, but grate shellfish, which they swallow with water. They rub themselves with genipa, or with reed leaves burned with liana, which they call mouchao or miby. They do not get well as soon as patients who are made to sweat.

165 One sees very few other diseases among them, and it is a marvel that living such a mean life they are so healthy and fat and live so long. For it is certain that they usually live very long. It was only four or five months ago that the father of The Baron died, and his wife, The Baron's mother, still lives. The Baron, whose wife is still living, has a daughter; this daughter has a daughter and this latter already has children. So The Baron is a great-grandfather and his mother is a great-great grandmother [727] and The Baron's daughter, who is a grandmother herself, still has her own grandmother. And this is not the only example to be cited. Their long life must be attributed to their lack of cares.

751 They blame their demon for their diseases and if the illness is long and severe they call the bof'ayko to consult him about it. They
758 have a number of remedies which the women apply to the sick, but they treat the sick no more delicately than they do the healthy.

Relatives rarely or never visit their sick kin. Generally married
● [734] people do not visit the sick, because, they say, their bodies emit a force which afflicts the sick even more. That is why when one of The Baron's sons was ill, neither his brother, his sisters, nor his father went to see him; only his mother treated him and she did not communicate at all with his father.

727 When some among them are killed in war, they do what they can to recover the bodies and bury them. Following is how they bury their dead.

6: Taylor E-5 (1930-1937) 1938
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553 probability, of their forefather's conversion and of the name of his white godfather. Such today are Dauville, Lucien, Viville, John, Darroux, Benjamin, etc. But already these names are falling into disuse and being forgotten even by their bearers, who designate the individual by attaching the patronymic to the name—so, Norbert John, the son of John Jules, the son of Jules Benjamin. Friends sometimes "swap" or exchange names.

551 The Carib of Dominica retains the Indian's traditional dislike of the indiscriminate use of his name. In ordinary forms of address he almost always uses "compère," "commère" (the old "gossip"), "cousin," "chef," "babe," "boy," etc. He habitually refers to people by a nickname (Popote, Fanfan) or by abbreviating the real name (Ma' Ham for Madame Hamilton). When traveling or staying in some other part of the island or abroad, he invariably changes his name, adopting for the time what Roth calls a "nom de voyage." The reason for this, as explained to me by a Carib friend, is that "nobody can do you anything (piai, charm) when they do not know your right name." This idea that the name is part and parcel of the thing or person to whom it belongs, and the adoption of a false denomer, in order to trick the nefarious genii, is, I believe, peculiarly Indian. Thus, before going to the provision grounds or to the woods [777 for food, a mother of the old school will tell her children that she is ●784] going to "fouiller fourmis" (dig for ants), fearing that she would be unlucky and return empty-handed should she pronounce the real name, and say (for example) that she was going to look for wawa (wild yam: *Rajana cordata* L.).

576 Forms of greeting are seldom used by the Caribs. Even after a long absence, a man will arrive with a simple "I am come," and take leave, before a long separation, with no more than "I am going."

262 Women and children eat in the kitchen apart from the men and [264] after the latter have finished. I understand that this habit is peculiar, in Dominica, to the Caribs; though it would seem to be more a matter of convenience than custom in a community where the women do all their own housework. Vestiges of taboo seem to subsist with regard to the eating of certain foods. One old woman gave as the reason for not eating a species of sea crab, called agaya, that the [842] latter sometimes "had to do with women." She averred that this crab, were it to meet a girl or woman on the beach, would crawl up and urinate on her leg, thus rendering her pregnant for him. We read that the Caribs of other days would not eat hen, turtle, or eel for fear of thereby acquiring the unworthy characteristics of these beasts. There are Caribs in Dominica today who, for similar reasons, will not touch the meat of shark, conger eel, or an elsewhere widely consumed variety of fish, locally known as "vive."

8: Taylor E-5 (1930-1937) 1950
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The Meaning of Dietary and Occupational Restrictions Among the Island Carib

By DOUGLAS TAYLOR

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MOST famous among the several "retreats and fasts" undergone by the Island Carib of early Colonial times is that which has come to be identified as the *couvade;* and which still is practised, in a modified form, by the Carib Indian remnant on Dominica and by the Black Carib in Central America. As elsewhere (and notably in South America), this custom is based, immediately, upon the belief that a child's welfare, both before and for some time subsequent to its birth, may be affected by either the diet or the activities of the father as well as by those of the mother; but there is every reason to think—at least in so far as the Island Carib are concerned—that this is but one particular application of a more general concept: namely, that according to which an individual's occasional vulnerability to harmful forces may be alleviated or aggravated by the state not only of his (or her) own bodily "humors," but also by those of his (or her) associates.

Breton described the custom as he observed it among the mid-seventeenth century Dominica Carib in the following terms:[1]

Iuenematobu, my first-born, my fasting-matter. The Savages observe fasts rather often: particularly when a death occurs among them, on the arrival of a first child, and after the capture of an enemy, etc. They usually spend the first five days without eating or drinking, and for the next four take only a drink made from boiled cassava-cake; but after this, they may eat as much starch-cassava as they like during two or three months, at the end of which they (only) abstain from some kinds of flesh. It is not likely that the husband should start to cry out like a woman in child-birth. On the contrary, I've seen them come home secretly and stealthily, a month after the birth, to undergo their retreat and fasts; for which they give no other reason, to those who ask, than that of the scorn in which are held those who do not observe this custom: *that they grow old sooner, are slower on their feet, that the abundance of their humours would corrupt them, and that the sickness would pass over to the child, etc.*[2]

Armand de la Paix, who obtained much of his material from Breton, wrote:

When their wives have been confined, husbands withdraw; and they do not sleep together until five or six months later. *And both observe a fast* which is quite famous, especially if their first child be a boy. The man fasts more rigorously than the woman, for fear that the child might suffer . . . the Savage told him (Breton) that some abstain altogether, for the first five days after their wives' delivery, from eating and drinking, and thereafter until the tenth day take nothing but cassava-beer. After that, they eat only cassava and drink only cassava-beer *for a month or two.* . . . When the fast is over,

[1] Translations are by the author, as also is the italicization of certain passages they contain.
[2] Breton, 1892, p. 373.

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846 they still eat no fish or fowl—unless it be crabs, and these must be female—so long as
784 their children remain feeble and weakly. . . . Otherwise, he said, the children would have stomach-ache, or else bodily deformations resembling the animals that their fathers had eaten.[3]

Further details are given by du Tertre and by La Borde.[4] For a first-born male child, the father's retreat lasted three months; for other births, only five or six days; and during this period, he lived in a separate building and avoided those who were leading a normal life. But for six months after the birth of any child of his, he had to abstain from eating the flesh of certain animals. The mother also fasted for some—du Tertre says forty—days, drinking only warmed water, and eating dry cassava. On no account, says La Borde, must she eat female crabs. The child was bathed immediately after birth; and, so that it should not catch cold if this took place at night, all the men in the carbet got up and went out to bathe also.

765 When a death occurred:
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The children of the deceased or his wife cut their hair in sign of mourning. They *also fast for one or two months.* Father Raymond (Breton) asked them whether this fast helped the dead in any way, and they said: no; but that those who did not fast *would grow old sooner, be unsure of foot* and unable to see fish in the water, and that they would be liable to surprise by their enemies.[5]

Similarly:

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784 When girls begin to have their flowers, they make them *fast for one or two months;* as also the boys, when these attain their adolescence; and they have them scarified with aguti-teeth.[6]

758 According to La Borde, if a Carib were wounded when away from home, he
784 would send immediately to tell the members of his family, so that these might not, by continuing their normal diet and activities, become the involuntary cause of aggravating his affliction. It may be gathered, moreover, that they were not always disposed to co-operate fully in this matter; for we are told that:

The kin never, or but very rarely, visit their sick; and married (*du Tertre says:* newly married) people generally do not go at all, because, they say, *there emanates from their body a principle which afflicts the sick person the more.* For this reason, when one of the Baron's sons was sick, neither his brothers nor his sisters nor his father went to see him; *only his mother looked after him, and she kept away from the father.*[7]

784 We are also told that fasting was a prerequisite for the would-be *buiei* or
752 shaman, and for candidates for chieftaincy.
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[3] *In* Rennard, 1929, pp. 59–60.
[4] du Tertre, 1667–71, vol. II, p. 412; La Borde, *in* Hennepin, 1704, pp. 587–593.
[5] Armand de la Paix, *in* Rennard, 1929, pp. 72–73.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 61. [7] *Ibid.*, p. 72.

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These retreats and fasts culminated in a blood-letting ritual which was particularly severe in the case of an adult who had become a father for the first time, or in that of one who had "killed some Arawak." A chicken-hawk was sacrificed by crushing its head against that of the man, who then stood upon a pile of cassava-cakes whose centres only he had eaten during his fast, while his back was scarified with an aguti-tooth lancet until the blood ran down, and then rubbed with a decoction containing tobacco-juice, rocou-leaves (*Bixa orellana*), and the seeds of red-peppers (*Capsicum*) crushed together with the body of the sacrificed bird. Subsequently, he was given the latter's dried heart to eat, and finally had to take a drastic emetic (usually tobacco-juice) which made him "rendre tripes et boudins." After having undergone this ordeal, he had to fast for some days longer—although he might be "fed like a child" with some of his blood-soaked cassavas—while the others got drunk at his expense. Adolescents were treated somewhat more gently; but they too brought their sacrificial bird, and had their backs scarified; after which they had to remain fasting for some further time in their hammocks, and without changing the posture in which their sponsors had placed them, under pain of becoming deformed.[8]

Before attempting to interpret the somewhat complex syndrome of contagious magic implied by the foregoing review of seventeenth-century practices, it will be as well to set forth, in brief, the current forms of dietary and occupational restrictions found among the Dominica remnant of the Island Carib tribes and their more vigorous Central American offshoot, and the occasions for their application.

Blood-letting rituals such as that described above no longer exist, even in legend, among either of these groups.[9] Nor are adolescents or neophytes subjected by them to any special regimen. On the other hand, dietary or occupational restrictions—or both—are required of the new parent of either sex, of the bereaved spouse (particularly in the case of a wife who loses her husband), and of menstruating women. It is perhaps worth noting that, nowadays, those placed on men concern *only* activities, whereas those placed on women concern *mainly* diet.

From the Black Carib of British Honduras, it was learned that:

Once a woman knows herself to be pregnant . . . both she and her mate must refrain from killing or eating the flesh of certain animals. An informant recounted how his uncle once had killed a snake in his garden, while a woman—not even a "partner"—was pregnant for him; and how, as a result, the child had been still-born, with flat head and nose and small eyes like those of a snake. In another case, it was said that a

[8] Mainly from Breton, 1892, pp. 202–203.

[9] As a personal practice, however, many hunters, in order to have luck in the chase, draw blood from their arms by making a series of close, superficial cuts with a razor-blade.

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843 child had been born with a tail because the father had killed a monkey; and in yet
784 another, that a child always howled in bad weather because its mother had eaten "baboon" (Howling-monkey, Carib: *arouada*) while pregnant.[10]

784 Similar beliefs are also current among the present-day Carib Indians in
846 Dominica. Following her delivery, the mother must abstain from stimulants, acidulous fruits and juices, and from all "heating" foods and condiments for forty days. The list of forbidden items may vary in detail from family to family, but in all cases it would almost certainly include: coffee, all citrus, pork, game, turtle, crabs, and the dearly loved red-pepper (*Caspicum*). Nor must she take throughout this period, any water or other beverage that has not been previously warmed. On the third day, she is given a purgative infusion; and only after this has taken effect is the baby put to suckle her. Numerous and various herbs and leaves are collected by the wise-woman (who is often the parturient's mother), and put to steep in hot water. On the ninth day, a large pot of this concoction is drawn off and, after mother and child have been ritually bathed in the remainder, given to the former to drink. Her period of seclusion ended, the mother goes to bathe in the sea. The ritual nature of these baths appears from the fact that, for ordinary hygienic purposes, mother and child are bathed upon delivery, and daily thereafter; and while women, like men, normally bathe daily in the river for cleanliness, and but occasionally in the sea for fun, a pregnant woman is debarred from the latter diversion on the grounds that this would make the sea "rise" (in storm).[11]

The precautions observed by the new father are less exacting today, but quite as important. Throughout the forty-day period of his wife's seclusion, he must abstain from all sexual intercourse, be it with his wife or another; for any laxity in this regard might bring about his child's death. Nor must he, for an indeterminate though usually shorter period, undertake any activity demanding strenuous physical exertion or the use of sharp instruments or dangerous weapons. Negligence in this respect on his part is said to bring on colic, diarrhoea, and vomiting in the child; or to cause its navel to bleed and fail to heal properly. As a precaution, the father may tie a homespun thread of wild-pineapple fibre around his loins, and another round those of the infant; but should a mishap of this nature actually occur, he would rub the child's body with his own axillary sweat, or give a piece of his sweat-soaked shirt to be boiled in water, which would then be administered to the ailing infant as a medicine.

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[10] Author's unpublished ms.

[11] These data were obtained primarily by personal observation among the Dominica Carib; but tally for the most part with the accounts given by Black Carib informants in British Honduras. Material for the remaining descriptive paragraphs was obtained partly by direct observation and partly through informants in both places.

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On the other hand, a new-born child may be adversely affected by the diet or activities not only of its mother and father, but also by those of any others who come near it. Mother and child should not be visited, moreover, by persons who are in any way "abnormal." For the Carib this includes—besides those who are deformed, disabled, or lacking in some sense or faculty—all who are, to use a current expression, "heaty": this epithet being applicable both to pregnant or menstruating women, and to anyone who is momentarily heated by exertion, excitement, or emotion.

Girls and women are required to observe both dietary and occupational restrictions during their menstrual periods. At these times, they must on no account eat any products of the chase killed by dog or gun. One informant told how his dogs had inexplicably become heavy and incapable of speed; and how, on hearing a sort of slopping noise in their bellies, he had made investigations, and discovered that his own sister, out of gluttony, had concealed her condition and partaken of his last catch. Some say that a gun or dogs so "spoiled" may be "blessed," and thus put back to rights; but that in this case, it is the guilty woman who will then suffer for her negligence. Nor must menstruating women handle the hunter's dogs or weapons, cook food, or take part in ceremonial songs and dances. They should not, moreover, wander abroad nor bathe in the river, since spirits of the bush and of the water alike are addicted to women in this condition.

In British Honduras, though no longer in Dominica, the bereaved spouse must observe certain restrictions on diet and freedom of movement; but the extent and duration of these are largely dependent, at the present time, upon the degree of conservatism prevailing in the family concerned. However, it is generally held to be dangerous for a widow to go to the manioc-field for several months—some say eight—after the death of her husband.

From a comparison of the two sets of data, it seems clear, at least, that the "mystical participation" of the father in the life of his new-born child was—and is—by no means unique in Island Carib concept; and that the form, duration, and sanctions for the restrictions tended to be the same when these were undergone for one's own sake alone as when they were imposed, primarily, for that of another. As we have seen, not only the new-born child, but also its father, the sick and the wounded, and, in fact, all those turning one of life's critical corners, are or were thought to be endangered by a sort of physical exuberance emanating from heated, overfed, sexually or otherwise excited, pregnant, or menstruating bodies, be it their own or those of others associating with them. For the seventeenth century, the same period of seclusion—one or two months—is indicated for the bereaved, the slayer, the new father of a first child, or the adolescent; and for the first three of these, the same sanctions—growing old sooner, being less sure-footed, etc.—are mentioned explicitly. The voluntarily undergone deprivations and sufferings of the old-time Carib

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784 were not intended to assist the spirit of a deceased spouse or parent, nor to
781 atone for the slaying of an enemy; but rather were they meant to protect the living by a procedure which can only be described as "turning off the heat" at those points most susceptible to contagion or attack; and the same was probably true in the case of neophytes and adolescents. For obvious reasons, the new-born, the sick, and the wounded had more to fear from others' exuberant "humors" than from their own; and the bathing, after a nocturnal delivery, of all the household's possibly sexually excited men, the taboo against the visits of married or newly married people to those who were sick, and the modern avoidance of confined mother and child by those who are "heaty," all tend to the same conclusion: that we are not justified in regarding the "couvade" as a distinct phenomenon as far as this culture is concerned.

784 It is understandable that there should be some ambiguity in the situation
846 of new parents of a first child, since they, as well as their offspring, are at a vital turning-point, and hence in need of protection. Nor is it surprising that the new mother must submit to some chastening of her "animal spirits"; for, attenuated as these may be by her confinement, they still would be "too strong" for the baby she has to suckle, if not indeed sufficiently so as to endanger herself. It is noteworthy that the same period of seclusion as is observed today—forty days—was reported by du Tertre in the seventeenth century; and if the old chroniclers say little about the parturient's regimen, it is doubtless because they assumed it to be analogous to that current in their own culture. Rather naturally, what struck them was that the father's physical exuberance should be feared—for himself, for his wife, and for the child; and that if his first-born were a son, he must fast more rigorously than the mother. But it would appear that he also possessed, in his own body, a valuable antidote to the evil effects which another's—or even his own—negligence might bring upon the infant; for we are told that a sickly child was rubbed with blood which the father drew from himself by scarification; and we have seen that his sweat is held at the present time to have similar therapeutic virtues when employed in the same way.

784 In most cultures and at most times, various restrictions have been placed
841 on menstruating women; yet without the concept of some mystical intercourse between killer and killed, eater and eaten, it would be hard to explain how a hunter's dog (or gun) could be contaminated by a menstruating woman's ingestion of its catch, or how such a woman could then be affected by the "blessing" of the injured instrument.

784 Despite the considerable differences of content and extension which distinguish the dietary and occupational restrictions of 1950 from those of 1650, we still may recognize the same underlying conceptual pattern of "contagion." By this term is to be understood here the sum of potentially harmful or undesirable factors—be they impersonal forces or spirits—to which an individual

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may be exposed, and to which he (or she) becomes particularly vulnerable during critical passages of life. The principle, if not its applications, is familiar. What is less so is the Island Carib view of exuberant "body-heat" as the medium through which such factors operate. Add to this the by now well-known concept of a "mystic" relationship between begetter and begotten, killer and killed, eater and eaten, and intimate or even occasional associates, and many hitherto unexplained customs become clear.

There is no evidence that the old-time Island Carib—or his modern descendant—valued physical deprivation and suffering as a means of atonement, of schooling the will or hardening the body, or even as an ordeal (in the strict sense) or a proof of valor. His own term for these "retreats and fasts," *inenemali*, means, literally, "withdrawal from exposure," and indicates his attitude clearly enough. Some exposure there must always be, since every form of existence is potentially dangerous to every other form; but with ordinary precaution and so long—to use a simile—as there is plain sailing, one may keep a full sheet aloft and run before the wind without too much risk. When, on the other hand, the boat springs a leak, or there is a rugged headland to be rounded, it is time to take in sail.

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